

the sorry jacket.™

palace

About three years ago, Wikileaks began publishing the U.S.'s secret diplomatic cables. At first, the cables numbered in the low hundreds, and were only published after careful redaction by five of the world's greatest media institutions. Dated from 1966 onward, they mainly concerned critiques of the host countries of various U.S. embassies, and the impossibility of peace in the Middle East.

By February 2011, the leak had become a colossal international scandal known by the (unimaginative) title *Cablegate* — as over 250,000 unedited messages entered the public domain. The scope of information now extended to more serious matters, such as details of the War on Terror, and U.S. support for certain dictatorships.

The first time Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State, made a passing comment about requesting a 'Sorry Jacket' was in the immediate wake of Cablegate. However, it was only a recent internal memo intended for heads of executive departments and agencies that brought to light the full documents detailing the request for such a garment.

Embarrassed both by the scale and overly frank content of the leaks, Clinton was swiftly dispatched on a world tour to make excuses on behalf of her great nation. The request therefore called for an "apology tour jacket" to replace the constant verbal admission, and it was intended to be worn by all members of the US Foreign Service partaking in the tour of countries where relations had been tarnished — or in some cases severed completely.

The call for the jacket spells the end of the US as 'the reluctant sheriff', but also its recasting in the role of the overeager participant; and while it might not be the end of a state-centred realism, the leaks have spread a diplomacy where acting upon generalisations and pseudo-psychoanalysis have made way for new forms of protocol and behaviour. This is a result of new paradigms in communication: namely its fragility and pervasiveness.

The jacket also fits right in with an age-old Americana predicated on the taming of nature — newly manifested in the phenomena of wearing Himalaya-standard clothing in the city, which is really just social-relations-founded-on-consumption in disguise.

But this tour is much more than some sort of global re-run of the taming of nature by early American settlers, protected by their glowing jacket (Columbia) as she parted nature westward. It has to do with filling the fractures in unipolar domination and the retention of a Henry Loos' "American Century".

It is the jacket as a wearable Manifest destiny: American exceptionalism with pockets, that 'serves and protects' during a new kind of frontier-shattering: one through eggshell-diplomacy.

Each Sorry Jacket is branded with the personalised name and title of its owner and the dates/locations of the tour. Both sleeves contain the word "sorry" in the world's languages and an official endorsement with the seal of both the Departments of State and Homeland Security. Above the logo on its front is where golden stars can be affixed. Each star gained means one more foreign diplomat has restored confidence in the U.S.

The boisterous American semiotics of oversized stars and stripes, official seals, gold stars, are the means by which trust can be regained. It deliberately gives off an air of informality, so as to approach diplomacy as something now fluid, and under redefinition. Perhaps it is a radical attempt to depoliticise the diplomatic encounter into something not just informal but perhaps social... or even jokey.

Yet underwriting this is a fiercely patriotic spirit and rigorous tour, backed by growing defence spending and omnipresent foreign policy ageoda. It is fitting, then, that the jacket is actually fit for trekking, making it resistant to all political climates and made for all ends of the earth.

Palace (palacepalace.com) is an architectural design and research collaboration cofounded by Ben Reynolds and Valle Medina.

architecture's avatars.

j.arbona

Drawing contemporary architecture discourses of 'environment' close together with the blockbuster film *Avatar* reveals a certain connective tissue between the two. *Avatar* iconically represents for the viewer one manifestation of 'American environmentalism, familiar to architecture as well, in which cultural and biological security come about through war.

The film's director, James Cameron, told the New Yorker, "I suppose you could say I believe in peace through superior firepower." American militarist culture, which itself has become even more monumental since 9/11, comes to film audiences from what James Der Derian and others call the military-industry-media-entertainment (MIME) complex, which *Avatar* clearly fits into.

To rephrase Fredric Jameson for today's times, the underbelly of all culture is blood, torture, death, terror, and now, the environment — the environment as an extension of endless war. The contemporary MIME environment, a totalising tele-connected space, is a violent weapon that complements and completes Cameron's "superior firepower."

In *Avatar*, as one commodity of the MIME complex, the story begins with the grandiose promise of direct physical violence being replaced with deceptively friendly cultural aggression. The avatars, perfect neuro-tethered biodrones — the sort that the Pentagon's blue sky think-tank, DARPA, is pioneering — eerily evoke the actual American cultural soldiers, (anthropologists, psychologist, geographers, and other social scientists) the U.S. has sent to Iraq and Afghanistan to supposedly win the so-called war for hearts and minds.

The neologism biodrone is meant here to indicate that the environment and the robot itself, as much as they may seem from two opposing worlds, are ultimately parts of one and the same homespun medium. The American idea, so well crystallised in *Avatar*, is the fantasy of mastering the invaded environment through intelligence, science, and technology. The

ultimate myth of *Avatar* is one of socio-environmental penetration; interiority displacing exteriority.

Such is the desire, as well, from the drone-operator's control room, a reclusive detachment comparable with the architectural 'research studio,' which is similarly the view in research architecture today: the fantasy to anxiously replace the mapped, crisis-prove environment with controlled design. Architecture has to face what amounts to a combined methodological and political crisis, a hint of which can be glimpsed in the "real" architecture of *Avatar*. In order to produce *Avatar*, as commodity, it was necessary to first create the movie's own unique filming environment, a techno-space Cameron had to wait 12 years for, until animation technology caught up with his vision.

The environment we see on film is but one apparition emerging from a complex and discontinuous material environment of computers, digital models, sets, and costumes, not to mention corporate offices.

But, much like the biodrones, architecture in the bland, corporate design research environment can't see — refuses to see — its own material threads from within.

After all, the gaze of the drones flying over more and more countries every day have a way of visually disassociating people from their complex territories and environmental relations, while targeting them — the gaze that binds the target to the frame of vision and shoots. This deceitful vision also clouds the fact that it is not just pilots who fly the planes. Behind each drone there are operators occupying a myriad of spaces: spy headquarters in Virginia, lawyers in the White House, the Commander-in-Chief, on-the-ground special op's, logistical support, and pilot consoles at American military bases. In the end, it is nearly impossible to identify a singular assassin and ascribe guilt. This fragmented vision and dispersed spatiality, spinning out into society-at-large through social, affective, and kinship ties begins to incriminate and penetrate us all.

Javier Arbona is a writer and academic focussing on architecture, urban theory, space, culture and authority. He cofounded Demilit, an experimental landscape collective.



Sorry Jacket, 2012, by Valle Medina and Ben Reynolds

Additional technical information 2-layer stretch, active-laser-cut, fully-taped, zip-concealed, Slim-fit, Ripstop 100% nylon fabric; with 700-fill, reinforced actiCARE, WarmCore, CLIMapro, microLite, InterActiv, FreeVent, smarTex, triWeave goose-down insulation.